

THE SELF, MOTIVATION & VIRTUE PROJECT

supporting innovative, interdisciplinary moral self research

Performing Virtue

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PERFORMING VIRTUE

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As a university professor and as a Jesuit priest, I am privileged with many and varied opportunities to notice virtue “passing into holy souls.” Whether it is a student trying to cultivate honesty and intellectual perseverance in the frenzy of a results-driven Silicon Valley, an LGBTQ colleague aiming to live an integral life of justice and love in an often confusing religious landscape, or an incarcerated youth in the downtown jail trying to figure out how to water hope and forgiveness within a seemingly hopeless and unforgiving landscape, I am continually amazed at how the pursuit of virtue (whether intentional or not) remains a critical ingredient in the recipe for engaged human living.

As a theatre historian I have always been compelled by the ways in which performance and virtue have intersected (or not). Though classical Greek tragedy clearly aimed to inculcate civic virtues in its audiences, the early fathers of the Christian church (e.g., Tertullian, Augustine, Chrysostom) saw the form and content of public spectacles as essentially incompatible with Christian commitments. Though amateur medieval theatres personified the virtues as the defenders of humanity (as in, for example, the 15th century morality play *The Castle of Perseverance*), the increasingly professionalized early modern theatre—which involved the exchange of money, the competition for audiences, and the *mysterium tremendum* of the professional actress—caused civic and religious critics of performance to construct the theatre and its practitioners as peddlers of vice sowing the seeds of society’s demise.

My research interests of late, however, have focused on the role of performance in Jesuit educational enterprises. Founded in 1540 by the erstwhile Basque nobleman Ignatius of Loyola, the Society of Jesus made broad and deep cultural engagement, particularly through education, a hallmark of its service to the church and the world. Born in schools that aimed to impart a deeply humanistic education to young laymen preparing to take their places on the early modern public stage, Jesuit theatre worked at cul-

tivating the verbal and physical eloquence necessary for public life as well as forming hearts and minds in the human and Christian virtues required for becoming a moral person. In relationship to other species of Catholic school drama, Jesuit theatre proved distinctive in the extraordinary number of plays produced, the geographical reach of the dramas, and the extensive investment of resources in theatrical presentation.

As early as 1551, three years after the establishment of the Society's first college in Messina, Sicily, the Jesuits began staging full-scale theatrical productions. In addition to the dialogues and orations that were already a standard part of the curriculum, every Jesuit school throughout Europe and the mission territories staged tragedies, comedies, biblical dramas, saint plays, and/or history plays. Theatrical productions, many of which incorporated music and/or dance, took place twice per year, often at Carnival and then again at the annual distribution of prizes. Patronal feasts, the visitation of ecclesiastical or political dignitaries and special civic celebrations provided additional occasions for performance. These theatrical events allowed students to demonstrate their educational progress to a broad audience while publicizing the good reputation of the school. Involving citizens in these productions and/or staging the plays in important public spaces served to nourish the relationship between the Jesuit college and the locality.

Most pertinent to the "Self, Motivation and Virtue Project" is the notion that virtues can be cultivated and virtuous behavior taught in and through theatrical performance. Jesuit education systematized this insight, albeit in the midst of persistent internal anxieties surrounding theatre's innate sensuality. The Jesuits' incarnational approach to education (what, today, we might call "engaged learning") required that students not only study human and Christian virtues by reading important texts but also appropriate those virtues by literally performing them, making a home for them in their bodies. It was one thing to consider the nature of bravery or temperance in Cicero's *De officiis* and quite another to embody bravery in playing the biblical Judith and to exercise temperance in representing the Hippolytus-like Crispus. And even in cases where students were saddled with the obligation to enact vice—as in the Faustian Cenodoxus—the often spectacular dramatic effects highlighted the wages of non-virtuous living!

Though discussions of Jesuit theatre often terminate with the suppression of the Order in 1773, the Society (after its restoration in 1814) continued to employ theatrical performance, particularly in the Americas, not only to educate and evangelize but also to publicize the Society's emerging institutions. I have undertaken a rather sprawling, though necessary, investigation of Jesuit related performance in the 19th and 20th centuries. Dialogues, orations and full-scale theatrical productions were presented in nearly every Jesuit school founded in the US, particularly at public exhibitions and Commencement Exercises, to exercise students' ability at public speaking, to assist with language acquisition, *and* to develop the intellectual and spiritual virtues—faith, loyalty, courage, moderation, prudence, industriousness—necessary for establishing a Catholic presence within an American, democratic context.

The theatre (as well as all the other embodied performing arts) continues to open up an increasingly rare space in human life—a space to *practice*, to not get things right the first time. When we see a production of *A Doll's House*, we see a Nora that has been discovered and shaped by countless hours of study and experimentation in the rehearsal hall. Where do we provide the room for human beings to rehearse virtuous living—either by experimenting with ways of acting or immersing themselves in challenging situations that might call forth something from them that they did not know they had? Nodding to all of those jokesters that have ever asked, “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?”, the theatre and its cousins help us remember that we likely get to virtue the same way: “Practice, practice, practice.”

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